

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – January 14, 2016

EQUITY LEADERS ACTION NETWORK AIMS TO REDUCE RACIAL DISPARITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

OLYMPIA, WA – Four Washingtonians have joined the Equity Leaders Action Network (ELAN) to advance racial equity in early childhood systems.

ELAN is a focused effort across 20 states, the District of Columbia and Guam, composed of thirty-eight fellows who work at the state or county level in the areas of health, early learning and family support. Over the next three years, ELAN fellows will work together to identify, address and take action on inequities based on race, ethnicity, language and culture in our early childhood systems.

Washington’s ELAN fellows include Evette Jasper, Dr. Jill Sells, Heather Kawamoto and Bianca Bailey. Their participation will build on existing statewide commitments to advance racial equity.

“Racial equity is deeply embedded into the Department of Early Learning’s strategic goals,” said the [Washington State Department of Early Learning](#) (DEL) Director, Ross Hunter. “We are collaboratively working toward a future where all children have equitable opportunities for quality education and ELAN means progress for this work.”

One of DEL’s partners, Thrive Washington has been a leader in bringing race to the forefront of statewide conversations and convened partners and community stakeholders to develop a [Racial Equity Theory of Change](#), a vision and pathway for making sure Washington’s early learning system ultimately closes the opportunity gap. “We view early learning as a social justice issue in Washington state,” said Thrive President & CEO Sam Whiting. “Intentional, focused efforts like ELAN will help us learn from national leaders to ensure we implement the best strategies locally to eliminate the opportunity gap.”

“From birth, language-rich ‘back and forth’ interactions between parent and child are critical for optimal development,” said Dr. Jill Sells, a pediatrician and Executive Director of [Reach Out and Read Washington State](#). “By 9 months of age, skill differences are measurable between children, so we must start with parents and babies.” To address this, Reach Out and Read works with more than 1,500 medical providers in diverse settings across Washington, including tribal and military clinics, community health centers, and other clinics reaching large numbers of low-income families, children of color, and families with a home language other than English, including immigrant, migrant, and refugee populations. Doctors prescribe new books as they help parents learn how to support their child’s early language and literacy development. “Reach Out and Read is designed to level the playing field and reduce inequities, and it is embraced across diverse cultures,” said Dr. Sells. “I’m excited to work with my ELAN colleagues to build an early learning system that will help all children be ready for kindergarten.”

“The question we’re grappling with currently is how to design a birth to three system that provides culturally and linguistically responsive supports and meets each child’s needs in the context of their family and community,” said Evette Jasper, State/Local Coordination Administrator within the Partnerships and Collaboration Division at DEL. “We can now tap into a network of leaders who can help us identify potential paths forward.”

[Puget Sound Educational Service District](#) (PESD) serves about 5,000 children prenatal to 5 years of age in Early Head Start, Head Start, and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program in King and Pierce Counties. PESD is striving to become an AntiRacist MultiCultural Organization with the goal of success for each child and elimination of the opportunity gap. “Through ELAN, I will have the opportunity to learn and collaborate with other ELAN fellows across the country to develop and implement a professional learning plan,” said Heather Kawamoto, PESD Equity in Education Program Manager. “This plan aims to increase awareness and knowledge of how race, racism, privilege, and power impact outcomes for children. Our long-term goal is that children receive racially/culturally responsive services and instruction so that race is no longer a predictor of whether a child will or will not be ready to succeed in kindergarten.”

“It is not enough to have equality, we must have EQUITY! If we begin to meet others where they are and provide them with what they need to be successful, we all succeed,” said Bianca Bailey, Parent Ambassador Coordinator for the [Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP](#). “Everyone deserves the chance to be great, so I am starting at the beginning with children and families in the early learning system. ELAN is providing me with a network to make the impact that much wider and to change the status quo in this country.”

The ELAN is a strategy of the [BUILD Initiative](#), which for years has promoted early childhood systems work that identifies and addresses the root causes of disparities and supports state remedies to address them.

BUILD’s vision is of a comprehensive, racially equitable, high-quality early childhood system that ensures all children have an opportunity to develop and reach their full potential, without experiencing discrimination or bias. ELAN fellows will take action to reduce disparities with the choices and decisions they make and their influence on state and local policy and practices. BUILD will learn from each of these actions and share the learning throughout the early childhood field.

About DEL: *The Department of Early Learning was created in 2006 to help all Washington children reach their full potential. DEL oversees the state-funded preschool program, child care licensing and subsidies, early intervention services, and other initiatives and programs to support parents as children’s first and most important teachers. For more information, go to www.del.wa.gov.*

Media Contact for DEL: Stephanie Liden
360.725.4392 (office)
360.515.8699 (cell)
Email: stephanie.liden@del.wa.gov